

Cultural Texts and Contexts in the English-Speaking World (IX)

2025 Theme: “History Claims Everybody”

Online Conference – March 28th, 2025

Hosted by the English Department of the Faculty of Letters, University of Oradea

Conference webpage:

<https://litere.uoradea.ro/litere2022/index.php/cercetare-tt/manifestari-stiintifice/cultural-texts-and-contexts-in-the-english-speaking-world>

Conference Scope

Our conference invites participants to reflect on how literature and cultural texts mediate history’s claims on individuals and communities. How do narratives—literary, historical, journalistic, or digital—construct, contest, or reinterpret the past? How do they reclaim silenced voices, address trauma, or shape collective memory in the English-speaking world?

History is frequently perceived as a factual recounting of past events, an objective record capturing reality as it unfolded. However, as Hayden White demonstrates in seminal works such as *Metahistory* (1973) and *The Content of the Form* (1987), historical representation is far from neutral. Instead, it is a narrative construction shaped by the values, ideologies, and aesthetic choices of its creators. White contends that the act of writing history is as much about storytelling and interpretation as it is about the presentation of facts. Historical narratives, therefore, should be understood not as passive reflections of reality but as carefully curated and creatively structured accounts of the past.

Central to White’s framework is the concept of *emplotment*—the process by which historians organize historical events into narrative structures such as romance, tragedy, comedy, or satire. These narrative forms are not merely containers for facts; they actively shape how the past is interpreted and understood. For instance, a romantic emplotment may frame a historical event as a tale of triumph and redemption, while a tragic emplotment might present it as a story of inevitable decline. These choices imbue historical narratives with coherence and meaning, while also reflecting the cultural and ideological assumptions of their authors.

In *Figural Realism*, White delves deeper into the literary techniques embedded in historical writing, emphasizing the role of tropes, metaphors, and figurative language in imbuing historical events with significance. He argues that historical narratives derive their explanatory power not from an objective mirroring of reality but through the ways events are framed, connected, and rendered meaningful within a broader narrative context. This perspective underscores the interpretive nature of historical representation, challenging the traditional view of history as purely factual. Expanding on this idea, White’s later concept of the *practical past* in *The Practical Past* (2014) shifts the focus from history as a static record of the past to history as a resource for the present. He argues that societies selectively draw upon history to address contemporary concerns, constructing narratives that serve present-day identities, moral frameworks, and cultural memory.

Building on White’s ideas, Jan Assmann’s work in *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization* (2011) explores the mechanisms through which societies institutionalize

memory to preserve and shape collective identity. Assmann distinguishes between *communicative memory*, rooted in lived experiences and oral traditions, and *cultural memory*, which relies on texts, rituals, and monuments to preserve the past across generations. His theory emphasizes how cultural memory serves as a bridge between historical events and the values of contemporary communities, creating continuity even as societies evolve. Assmann's framework invites us to consider how literature and cultural texts act as repositories for this memory, reinterpreting historical narratives for future generations.

Ron Eyerman, in *Memory, Trauma, and Identity* (2019), complements this perspective by focusing on how collective memory is shaped by trauma. Eyerman argues that cultural trauma—events that profoundly disrupt collective identity—generates narratives that seek to restore cohesion and meaning. These narratives are often mediated through literature, art, and other cultural texts, which serve as tools for processing, negotiating, and sometimes contesting the traumatic past. Eyerman's work highlights the interplay of memory and identity, emphasizing how cultural texts engage with historical trauma to construct narratives that are both reflective and transformative.

Together, these theories challenge traditional notions of historical objectivity and invite us to reconsider how the past is represented, remembered, and repurposed. This conference aims to explore how narratives—whether literary, historical, journalistic, or digital—construct, contest, and reinterpret the past. We also welcome new theoretical approaches that align with the theme of the conference and broaden our understanding of history's role in shaping identity and cultural memory. Papers are encouraged from a range of disciplines, including literary studies, cultural studies, film and drama studies, gender studies, language studies, translation studies, and the teaching of English as a foreign language. Participants are invited to examine how texts and narratives reclaim silenced voices, address trauma, shape collective memory, and mediate identity in the English-speaking world and beyond.

Key Questions for Submissions

We welcome papers addressing, but not limited to, the following questions:

- How do literary texts construct or challenge historical narratives, shaping cultural, national, or personal identities?
- How does Hayden White's concept of *emplotment* illuminate the narrative structures of historical fiction or drama?
- What are the implications of White's *figural realism* and *practical past* for the representation of history in literature?
- How does Jan Assmann's distinction between communicative and cultural memory inform our understanding of historical narratives?
- In what ways do counter-narratives in literature reclaim marginalized or silenced histories?
- How does literature preserve or contest cultural memory, particularly in the context of canon formation?
- How do literary texts represent trauma (e.g., war, genocide, displacement) and transform it into collective or cultural memory, as theorized by Eyerman?
- How do postmodern historical fictions critique official histories and blur the boundaries between fact and fiction?
- How do digital technologies (e.g., video games, virtual reality, digital archives) reshape narratives of history and memory?
- How do literary texts in English-speaking cultures respond to global historical events such as colonialism, migration, or climate change?

Submission Guidelines

Please submit an abstract of 150–200 words by **February 28, 2025**, via the following link:

<https://forms.gle/zQXck5GpxgQKAsAdA>

Notifications of acceptance will be sent by **March 5, 2025**. Presentations should be no longer than **20 minutes**.

Suggested Bibliography

1. Hayden White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020.
2. Hayden White, *The Practical Past*. Northwestern University Press, 2014.
3. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Northwestern University Press, 1987.
4. Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.
5. Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.
6. Ron Eyerman, *Memory, Trauma, and Identity*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.